

City Hall and Opera House  
Southwest corner of East Main Street  
and South Rouse Avenue  
Bozeman  
Gallatin County  
Montana

HABS No. MON-18

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
801 19th Street, N. W.  
Washington, D. C. 20006

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BOZEMAN CITY HALL AND OPERA HOUSE

Bozeman, Gallatin County, Montana

ADDRESS: Corner of East Main St. and Rouse Ave.  
OWNER: City of Bozeman  
OCCUPANT: Demolished in 1966  
USE: Formerly city offices, police and fire stations

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Built in 1887-90, the three story brick building housed the general city offices, city jail and fire station on the first floor, a civic auditorium or opera house on the second floor, and rental office space on both. The design and construction of this large undertaking for a city of 3,000 inhabitants began before the Territory of Montana gained statehood in 1889. The style of the building can best be classified as having been influenced by the Chicago School of Architecture. It was designed by Byron Vreeland, a local architect.

The Opera House section of the building served the city as a social and cultural center; grade school and high school graduations, recitals, political rallies and lectures made it a busy place. In addition, Bozeman was a regular stop for traveling theatrical companies in the northwest. On the stage of the Bozeman Opera House appeared such notables as Madame Modjeska, Edwin Mayo, Fredrick Warde, Al Jolson, Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson plus many unknown actors in a jumble of minstrel shows, melodrama, drama, comedy and tragedy.

Economic conditions, the advent of movies and changes in entertainment tastes of the public caused the closure of the opera house, but the city offices, police department and fire station were housed in the building until 1966 when a new city hall was built. The building was declared unsafe for large gatherings in the 1920's, but subsequently withstood several major earthquakes. After the new city hall was finished, the old building was demolished.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Planning for the City Hall and Opera House began in 1887. The existing city offices were crowded, jail space was leased in an old shack, and

the growing, prosperous city was looking confidently to the future. In May, 1887, a bond issue of \$10,000 was approved to finance a new city hall.

For the sum of \$300, local architect Byron Vreeland was hired to provide plans and supervision for the proposed building. During the three weeks Vreeland spent on the design and working drawings, the modest building to house city offices grew to include an opera house or theater space. Yet no objections were raised until the day of reckoning came some two months later. By then a lot had been purchased for \$3,500, the architect had been promised \$300, and the basement had been built for \$2,800, a total expenditure of \$6,600. When bids were opened for completion of the building, the low bid was \$21,950. More than half of the bond issue money had been spent before the building was above ground level, and much more money was needed.

The city council accepted the bid of Kermode and Davis, low bidders, and authorized another bond issue of \$25,000 to be approved by the voters. But there was a great deal of controversy over the legality of this bond issue. Existing laws prohibited a city from voting bonded indebtedness exceeding 2% of its assessed valuation. The \$25,000 was within that limit, but that plus the \$10,000 indebtedness assumed a few months earlier was greater. The bond election carried, but when the bonds were offered for sale, there were no takers; they had been scared off by the question of the legality of the bonds. Finally in the spring of 1889, the foundation was covered to protect it from the weather and construction ceased.

Mayor John V. Bogert had planned a festive celebration on July 4, 1888, with a parade, speeches, street decorations and a gala ball. Even though construction on the city hall and opera house had been stopped, the laying of its cornerstone was the highlight of the day. A metal box containing a history of the city officers from the date of the city's incorporation, a copy of the city charter and ordinances, drawings of the building, etc., were to reveal to future generations the names and accounts of the times when the cornerstone should be over-turned.

The cornerstone (unmarked, and its location the subject of a great deal of speculation) was finally opened in 1966 when the building was torn down. Unfortunately, the box had rusted through and its contents were ruined.

The next spring, 1889, another bond election for \$25,000 passed, and this time the city was successful in selling them. In July the foundations were uncovered, the structural iron for the roof was ordered, floor

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joists were laid, and the brick walls began to rise. By early fall the building was closed to the weather. Then on October 21, 1889 the architect, Byron Vreeland died.

A few weeks later W. H. Babcock was appointed Superintendent of the Work for the city hall. During this period of construction disagreement arose between Mayor Bogert and the City Council over whether the stage of the Opera House, designed to slope, should not be level as he (the Mayor) insisted that the theaters in Chicago were built. The council refused to approve changes, and construction continued even as the arguments grew heated. Mayor Bogert refused to run for re-election, and in May, 1890, H. A. Pease took the office.

By now the local newspaper, The Avant-Gourier, was editorializing about the "botched" design of the second floor space. The city offices moved into their new quarters and the extra offices were offered for rent. Within a year the city library occupied the room above the fire hall. But the Opera House itself had to be remodeled before it could open.

Architect George Hancock was hired to supervise the changes. The very first meeting held in the new council room had a top-priority item on the agenda -- a report from the Finance Committee which revealed that funds would be exhausted before work was completed and that a deficit of about \$2,700 was forecast based on present obligations. The report from the Building Committee stated that in order to provide heating, plumbing, iron shutters on the jail, outhouses, and to properly furnish the building, another \$7,000 would be needed.

A date was set for another \$10,000 bond issue, and on September 4, 1890, it passed. The cost of the building had risen from the original budget of \$10,000 to \$45,000. But Bozeman had an Opera House to be proud of, and the people were anxious to use it. On September 14, 1890 the first performance was held -- a benefit to raise money for curtains and scenery staged by a local group of musicians, the Queen City Band. Then on October 13, 1890, the first out-of-town group appeared. It was the Mendelsohn Quintet Club of Boston, appearing in concert. On October 20 the Caroline Gage & Keene Co., a repertory company, arrived for a week's run, and the course of the Bozeman Opera House was fairly launched. A number of plays, concerts and dances (the seats of the main auditorium area were removable) quickly followed.

In March, 1891, the grand opening of the Bozeman Hotel, newly erected across Main Street from the Opera House, took place. Permission was given to use the Opera House for part of the celebration, and a temporary wooden footbridge was built across Main Street from the second floor Ladies Parlor of the hotel to the auditorium floor of the City Hall. There were orchestras and dancing in both places, and the guests passed freely between them over the bridge.

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The Opera House was used regularly for various local events -- grade school, high school and college graduations took place there; both political parties held fiery rallies there each election year; there were talent shows, recitals and concerts by the Bozeman residents. In addition, most of the theatrical companies traveling between Minneapolis and Seattle on the Northern Pacific stopped for at least one night's stand. Minstrel shows alternated with tragedy, grand opera with slapstick, and concerts with drama in a random pattern. The auditorium was busy -- often three or four events were scheduled per week.

Before the Opera House was eight years old, complaints of the facilities were recorded by various performers, while roof repair had become a yearly project. In 1898, architect C. S. Haire of Helena, Montana, was commissioned to correct some of the problems. To correct the difficulties of a leaky roof and a too-low loft over the stage area, he proposed building a new flat roof above the existing Mansard roof by building up the exterior walls some 15' to support the new roof. The old roof remained in place and the new roof rested upon large trusses on the old one. An illusion of a third floor was created by putting windows in the new wall. The extension completely changed the exterior character of the building. The contract for this remodeling was let on September 1, 1898, for a sum of \$5,633.

Through the years repairs and minor remodelings were made as the need arose. The building was rewired in 1902, and after the disastrous Iroquois Theater fire in Chicago in 1904, fire escapes were ordered for the Bozeman Opera House. Two years passed before they were delivered and installed, however.

In 1911 the year's profits of \$1,700 went into new scenery, dressing room renovations and other necessary improvements. The year 1914 saw major changes. The boxes were removed, the proscenium arch lowered, a new curtain was installed, and there was a general remodeling. By then the Opera House began to feel the competition from the two "electric theaters" that had opened on Main Street. Movies were sometimes shown in the Opera House to supplement the theatrical productions that now came less frequently. Local bands still gave their concerts on this stage, however, high school classes held their graduations, and political speakers thundered on and on.

In 1916 the name of the Opera House was changed to Municipal Theater. On October 29, Clarence Darrow appeared with a tirade against "Prohibition"; earlier in the year Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson starred in The Passing of the Third Floor Back, and Birth of a Nation was moved from the Gem Theater to the Municipal Theater because the larger auditorium could handle the crowds that flocked to the movie.

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More and more often, though, the auditorium was dark. World War I greatly reduced the number of road shows. Then in 1920 a large auditorium was built in the new Emerson school, and local events began to be held there. Finally, the National Guard rented the Opera House for drill, and the seats were removed. In 1927 they were replaced after the Guard found new quarters. The Opera House had a revival when the college drama class put on The Importance of Being Earnest, and the high school class of that year held its exercises there, but it was brief.

Growth of the city and consequently city government necessitated expansion of the city offices. The fireman's dormitory was built out and under one side of the balcony, and a police courtroom on the other side. The police needed more cells, so they converted the dressing rooms under the stage. The stage was finally reduced to storage of Christmas street decorations.

The earthquake of 1959 caused additional damage to the structure, and a move developed for a new building. Plans were drawn, but several bond elections were held and the issue was defeated. The old building became more rundown, and finally a new city hall was authorized and built. The old city hall building was vacated in 1965, and the following spring demolition began.

#### SUPPLEMENTAL REFERENCES AND SOURCES

Bozeman Avant-Courier, Bozeman, Montana, 1887 to 1906.  
Burlingame, M. G., Gallatin Century of Progress, Gallatin County Centennial Publication, Bozeman, 1964.  
City Commission Minutes, Bozeman, Montana, 1888-1898.  
Montana, A State Guide Book, Federal Writers' Project, Viking Press, New York, 1939.

#### ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

##### EXTERIOR

Overall Dimensions - 55'-1" x 128'-2", three story masonry building with bell tower.

Foundation - stone.

Wall Construction - Brick bearing wall construction 1'-4" thick with cut stone trim. Cast iron and wood panel first floor front facade.

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Openings - Entrance: Main entryway to the second floor Opera House was on the front or north facade. Here two decorative wood-panelled doors with a light in each were framed by ornately cut stone blocks and an oval transom light of stained glass which bore the name "Bozeman Opera House".

Running above the transom were horizontal blocks of stone with raised letters reading "City Hall". Entrance to the northeast corner room, originally a rented office, was effected through to decorative wood doors, each having a large light, above which ran a horizontal transom light.

The fire engine room had two folding doors of two doors each -- all having a single large light. On the west side of the fire engine room there was a single decoratively panelled door with a large light. A window balanced the composition of the east side. All of the above doors were located on the north facade.

On the east facade was another door to the northeast office space, later bricked-in. Also on the east side was a recessed doorway with two doors, each at a 45° angle to the exterior wall, which opened into the city offices. These doors are similar to the north office doors. Further along this east wall were three other doors. The first (not original) led to a city office room, the next to a back hall, and the last into a back staircase which led upward to the stage dressing rooms and green room.

Windows: First floor: large plate glass windows with single rectangular transom light above each window. On the east facade (there were none on the west) were 2/2 double hung wood windows. The single window on the east side of the northeast corner office has a single light with an oval transom.

Second floor: 2/2 double hung units, some with transom lights either oval or rectangular. Two small 4/4 double hung units on the second floor, east facade.

Circular windows decorated the front balcony level and the tower. An oval window of small square panes was centered in the small gable portion of the front facade. A similar unit, although split by a chimney stack, was found in the gable end of the east facade (stage loft area).

Roof - Mansard, sheet lead covering, with two small gables, one in the northwest corner and the other in the southeast corner.

Chimneys - Numerous, of the same brick as the walls.

## INTERIOR

Floor Plans - First floor: The entrance centered in the front provided access to the second floor opera house. On the west side of the entrance was the fire truck area, and behind that were located a storage room, toilet and the two jail cells, one for men and one for women. On the east side was office space that was originally rented out, and behind this office were the city council assembly room, treasurer-assessor's office, another office, the fireman's hall, jailer's quarters and finally a staircase that provided access from the outside to dressing rooms beneath the stage.

Second floor: The central staircase opened into a small lobby area where the ticket booth was located. On each side L-shaped staircases led up to the balcony. At the front of the building on each side were two for the city attorney and marshall and two offered for rent. The auditorium, seating about 400, occupied approximately one-half the full length of the building; the offices took about one-fourth and the stage and orchestra pit the remainder. The stage ran the full width of the building on the south. Access to the dressing rooms was obtained by two L-shaped staircases on the east and west rear. The stage had a sloped floor with an oval front, and the orchestra pit followed the curve of the stage front. Private boxes, two on each side of the stage, were stacked one above the other.

Third floor: A serpentine balcony extended over half of the main auditorium and fully above the second floor offices back to the north wall.

Stairways - Enclosed, mentioned above.

Floors - T & G pine, except basement which had an earth floor.

Wall and Ceiling Finish - plaster. Wood wainscot, plastered above in the main auditorium. Ceilings were plastered in all areas except a metal pan ceiling in the main auditorium.

Doors - Four-panel, wood.

Trim - All trim elaborately carved; originally stained.



Hardware - Ornate door knobs and escutcheon plates. One of the exterior door knob assemblies was solid bronze. Interior door knob assemblies were bronze plate with black enamel in-fill.

Lighting - electric.

Heating - hot water.

#### SITE

The building was situated on the southwest corner of the intersection of Main Street and Rouse Avenue and extended southward from the north side walk to the service alley, half the depth of the block.

Prepared by,

*John N. DeHaas, Jr.*

John N. DeHaas, Jr.  
Architect

May 1967

Approved:

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